# New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

Volume XVIII, Number 25 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 9, 1957

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"The Dark at the Top of The Stairs"

"The Makropoulos Secret"

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*Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.*

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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# "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 6, 1957

## Drama Probes Family Fears

By FRANK ASTON.

With the writing of William Inge and the directing of Elia Kazan, the new play at the Music Box plunges into elemental emotions of domestic life. Its title is "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs."

Mr. Inge shows something of the fights and the love, the drollery and tragedy that come upon a respectable but not prosperous Oklahoma family in the 1920s.

With the assistance of Mr. Kazan, which must have been inestimable, the author has rolled up one rich scene after another in telling about a traveling salesman of harness, his wife, his teen-age daughter and his young son. A son of pioneers, the salesman looks about him at the price being paid by his onetime neighbors for their sudden wealth from oil and wonders whether "maybe it ain't easier to pioneer a country than to settle in it." The auto is destroying the harness business, he can't afford a $17 party dress for his daughter, he must learn a new business, and despite his loud and hairy-chested manner, he confesses he's afraid.

**They're All Afraid.**

His little boy is afraid of the dark "because you can't see what's in front of you." His daughter is afraid boys won't dance with her. His brother-in-law, a dentist, is afraid of hurting patients, and the dentist's wife has a lurking fear of her failure to meet the rudimentary urge of marriage. A visiting Jewish lad is so frightened by racial hatred that he kills himself.

Apparently the only one who hasn't lived in open or secret fear is the wife, but as the play opens and her husband slaps her during a quarrel she fears her life has smashed.

**Stairway Is Dark.**

These big feelings are packed into life-sized episodes that hit an audience hard. And their meatiness is meat indeed to the actors, to Teresa Wright, Pat Hingle, Eileen Heckart, Frank Overton and five gifted youngsters.

Ben Edwards' old-fashioned house (with a dark-topped stairway to scare the boy), together with the Ballard costumes and Rosenthal lighting, creates the needed atmosphere.

Your observer reports without reservation that the successive moments of pathos and laughter are richly rewarding. He would like to say as much in praise of the play as a whole. But Mr. Inge hasn't proved anything in particular and he has not written with the cohesion that would have made his thoughtfulness into a masterpiece.

**"THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS"**

Play in three acts by William Inge; staged by Elia Kazan; settings by Ben Edwards; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; presented by Saint Subber and Mr. Kazan at the Music Box Theatre, December 5, 1957. The cast:

Rubin Flood..... Pat Hingle
Cora Flood..... Teresa Wright
Sonny Flood..... Charles Saari
Boy Offstage... Jonathan Shawn
Reenie Flood.. Judith Robinson
Flirt Conroy..... Evans Evans
Morris Lacey... Frank Overton
Lottie Lacey.... Eileen Heckart
Sammy Goldenbaum.....
Timmy Everett
Punky Givens..... Carl Reindel
Chauffer..... Anthony Ray

New York Post

December 6, 1957

## TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

### Another Striking Drama by Inge

"The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" is the newest of William Inge's sensitive studies of lost and lonely people, misunderstood and misunderstanding even among those who think they know them best. Admirably acted in its first performance at the Music Box last night, it is a moving, perceptive and effective drama, demonstrating again Mr. Inge's notable ability to probe sympathetically into tortured souls under a facade of frequently humorous brightness, even though I am forced into an incidental reservation or two about it.

To get them out of the way first, it is my impression that, despite the forthright emotional power and appeal of the play, it is less dramatically overwhelming than it might have been because it suffers from a certain diffuseness in its attack. All of its people are wisely and compassionately studied, and all of them suffer from the same pangs of misunderstood loneliness, but it seemed to me that the threads of their mutual sadness were not entirely pulled together, leaving a certain feeling that we were watching a series of individual plays.

**The Family**

Although the drama therefore struck me as being somewhat more powerful in its parts than as a whole, I wouldn't think of denying the excellence of those parts. Essentially Mr. Inge is contemplating the threatened break-up of a brash harness salesman and his sensitive wife in the Oklahoma of the early 1920's after some 17 years of marriage. Their quarrels have had the effect of making their teen-age daughter and their son, who is somewhat younger, so shy and sullen that the boy has no friends and the girl is terrified of parties and dates.

These unhappy four are the central figures, but the author is equally interested in the other characters, and most of them are revealingly presented as being not what they seem. The apparently brash father is actually tormented by insecurity, and the seemingly prim wife is in reality highly-sexed, while her sister, who appears so domineering, hearty and earthy, confesses her unhappiness at sexual relations. And a young Jew, who strikes all of them, save one, as gay, charming and quietly assured, is suffering most of all from desperate loneliness.

In his previous work, Mr. Inge has shown how movingly he can dramatize inner-desperation, and here he presents his group of tortured introverts with every bit of his skill and understanding. There are innumerable scenes in which they pour out their souls with vastly moving dramatic compassion. If only for such episodes as the abject confession of the seemingly tougher sister, the defeated homecoming of the husband, and the winning over of the suspicious family by the Jewish stranger, this would be a notable play. What I see as its weakness is assuredly minor in comparison.

Under Elia Kazan's characteristically able staging, the playing is brilliant. Pat Hingle, an actor of superb vitality, is splendid as the husband, and Eileen Heckart, an unfailing actress, is at her best as the sister, while Teresa Wright is ideal for the role of the wife. Timmy Everett is deeply moving as the young Jew, and there are fine portrayals by Judith Robinson as the daughter, Charles Saari as the son, and Evans Evans as a teen-age playgirl. Even granting my reservation, Mr. Inge has written another striking drama.

The New York Times

December 6, 1957

# *The Theatre: Illuminations by Inge*

## 'The Dark at the Top of the Stairs' Opens

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WILLIAM INGE has written another drama that has a modest look but that is full of his particular insights and sympathies.

He calls it "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," and it was wonderfully well acted at the Music Box last evening. The title refers to the shadowy quality of the future that seems so ominous and terrifying to growing children. But it also could be described as an uncommonly forgiving drama about the things that people do not know about each other.

•

For this easygoing sketch of ordinary people stops long enough to make some stunning revelations about the private lives of husbands, wives, sisters and children. Not scandalous revelations: just quick and poignant glances into the privacy of hearts and souls. Under Elia Kazan's spontaneous direction, the performance is glowing and illuminating. The cast is perfect; the acting is superb.

Imagine yourself in a small town in Oklahoma in the early Ninteen Twenties. In his setting, Ben Edwards has caught the drafty hideousness of one of those middle-class houses that are lumped as "McKinley Style" in our folkways. It is the home of a salesman who is traveling in harness wares, his wife, his adolescent daughter and his younger son. They are average people. The adults are concerned about money. The children are involved in the painful social affairs of the young.

•

Nothing of consequence happens to any of them. But Mr. Inge has written about them with so much tenderness and understanding that his play is both amusing and touching. The amusing stuff concerns the quaint manners and the homeliness of the problems — feuds between brother and sister, the polite social insincerities of a hearty, garrulous adult relative who knows all the answers, the absurd proportions of family quarrels, the superstitions and ignorance of small-town Middle Westerners about Jews and Catholics.

But out of his memories of the time and place Mr. Inge has drawn other things that are deeply moving. The good manners and bright spirit of a lonely Jewish boy who finds himself among friendly people; the anguished reception of the news of his suicide after he has been publicly humiliated at a dance; the horror with which one married sister confesses that her marriage is a failure and the shocked silence with which the other sister listens; the husband's shamefaced confession of the fears with which he views his economic future.

Mr. Inge writes these scenes in a colloquial style. But they carry weight. They reveal the lonely agony of people who live together without really knowing one another, suffering in silence, communicating only when the situations are desperate.

A believer in the realities, Mr. Kazan has directed a beautiful, carefully detailed performance that looks simple but expresses at times some complex, shattering emotions.

In the three chief parts, Teresa Wright as the wife, Pat Hingle as the husband and Eileen Heckart as his sister-in-law are superb. Miss Wright gentle, soft and wondering; Mr. Hingle boisterous with a whining note of worry in his voice; Miss Heckart raucous, overeager and panicky inside — they preserve the homespun quality of the play and also disclose the darkness at the top of the stairs of their lives.

But this is a performance in which the young actors are especially important. Fortunately, they are all gifted actors. Judith Robinson as the oversensitive daughter who is terrified of the social crises of parties; Evans Evans as an exuberant adolescent girl who is bursting with the joy of life; Charles Saari as the poker-faced boy with a devastating knack of being silent when his elders are hoping for a kind word; Timmy Everett as the young Jewish boy whose humble manners reveal the barren correctness of the years he has spent in military academies—they are all winning, perceptive young actors who recognize the shy, rueful truths of the drama.

Call "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" Mr. Inge's finest play. Although the style is unassuming, as usual, the sympathies are wider, the compassion deeper and the knowledge of adults and children more profound.

Daily Mirror

December 6, 1957

## ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

# 'The Dark' Is Inge's Best Play

In our book, "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" is the best play that William Inge has written. And that's saying a lot, for so far he's merely given us such hits as "Come Back Little Sheba," "Picnic" and "Bus Stop." But we've got to choose the new tenant of the Music Box, because it digs deeper into what makes people tick than any of them.

There's not much of a plot to synopsize for you. A husband and wife are at odds, and they're undergoing the harrassment of trying to understand their children. He is a swashbuckling harness salesman, whose parents were Oklahoma pioneers, and he's baffled by the advent of oil millionaires, automobiles and country clubs, circa 1920.

**NOT KNOWING** that he's going to lose his job because people aren't buying harness for horses any more, she lets fly at him a little stronger than usual. So he stalks out of his house, vowing never to return.

But we all know he will, for he's a decent sort of guy, really in love with his wife and fond of his kids.

**Well, that's the gist of it. But it doesn't begin to give you an idea of the emotional churnings, of the soul searchings, that go on during that trying week when they're apart. The characters, major and minor, are etched with such insight and compassion as to overwhelm you.**

Not since George Kelly, we think, has a dramatist understood women so well as Inge. In his current smash, he bares their hearts and catches their speech with unerring accuracy. And don't get the impression that he doesn't understand men, too — their bravado and their inner fears.

Inge is fortunate in having Elia Kazan and Saint Subber as his producers, for Kazan, doubling as director, has staged this moving drama—the essence of humanity—with discernment. He has gotten magnificent performances from the entire cast, performances that make you proud of our actors.

**TERESA WRIGHT** is eminently right as the wife who, believing that her husband doesn't understand her, learns that others have their problems. Pat Hingle is perfect as the loud-talking, swaggering peacock, who covers his bewilderment at changing times with bluster. Eileen Heckart is just wonderful as the wife's gabby sister, who hides her own heartbreak beneath endless chatter.

**Evans Evans stands out as a teen-age gabster on the way to becoming a counterpart of the character portrayed by Miss Heckart. Timmy Everett offers an immensely touching and revealing study of a lonely boy driven to suicide by humiliation and neglect. Judith Robinson plays the shy daughter with an appealing, sensitive touch, while Charles Saari and Carl Reindel also make helpful contributions.**

Ben Edwards' setting, Lucinda Ballard's costumes and Jean Rosenthal's lighting are other assets.

"The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" is a stirring adventure in playgoing. It is a "slice of life" about people worthy of your sympathy and attention. Though it is tensely dramatic, it is packed with laughs tinged with tears. It will make you roar one minute and cry the next. Here is a triumph to add distinction to this season.

DAILY NEWS

December 6, 1957

# 'Dark at the Top of the Stairs' Moving and Beautifully Acted

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The title of William Inge's new play, "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," implies that there is nothing to fear in this dark at the top if you've got somebody climbing the stairs with you. If this somebody can offer love, or compassion, or understanding, the endless stairway which we call living is an easy climb and a safe one; but finding the right companion is a perilous task.

This is Inge's least dramatic play, and his best. It was given an absorbing, emotionally affecting performance at the Music Box last evening. The stage was filled with actors of uncommon skills, and their work was beautifully orchestrated by the director, Elia Kazan.

The play is a sentimental journey back to the early 1920s, carrying its audience to a small town in Oklahoma. Here, in one home — the home of Teresa Wright and her husband, Pat Hingle — happen most of the things that happen to most people. There is laughter and tragedy; loneliness and companionship both are here. And always there is this human yearning, this reaching out, for somebody who will help in this fearsome ascent.

### Small Troubles

Miss Wright and Hingle, parents of a teen-age daughter and a sub-teen son, put an end to their quarrels when they discover how small their differences are. Their children, always uneasy in a clouded atmosphere, now find the assurance they need for facing the future. But some of the others who come to this house are not so fortunate, for Inge can't solve everybody's problems in one small and delicate play. One excellent lad, shut out of life, must kill himself, and one couple, strangers through all their married years, remain strangers.

These characters of Inge's are little plays in themselves, and they are most admirably acted. Miss Wright, tender but inhibited as both wife and mother, is most affecting as she makes her climb to the top of the stairs. Hingle, as her rough-talking husband, finally finds within himself the tenderness he must offer.

### Fine Performances

There is a grand performance by Eileen Heckart as a woman who must remain a stranger to her husband—an expertly shaded performance which ranges from broad humor to pitiable loneliness. A tousle-headed boy, Charles Saari, is quite magnificent as a lad who doesn't know whom to tie to and masks his own loneliness in boyish defiance. Judith Robinson handles the assignment of playing a rather drippy daughter quite well, and Miss Evans Evans is a delightful sketch as a young flapper. Perhaps the most touching of all the performances is that of Timmy Everett as a Jewish boy who has no home, no family and no friends, and has been trying to make the best of it until he can climb the stairs no longer.

It's a good play. Not a great one, but quite moving.

Journal-American

December 6, 1957

# Inge's Best Play— With Kazan's Aid

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE MARCH of semi-autobiographical dramas continues: we've had quite a large helping of O'Neill, a brilliant and bitter segment of Thomas Wolfe, and last night, at the Music Box, we were treated to a homely and enormously compelling insight into the sort of surroundings in which William Inge grew up. This latest, "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," packs none of the raw violence of "Long Day's Journey," nor the adolescent intensity of "Look Homeward, Angel"—it doesn't try to.

It tells the tale of plain, decent people in a believable battle to raise a family, and it tells it with sympathy and deep understanding. It seems to me the skill of Mr. Inge relies on his painstaking excavation into character. There is no villain on the stage of the Music Box, yet there are many moments of strenuous conflict and despair, of joy and devotion. And there is always that cloying awareness of fear from which the play gets its title.

## Gifted Writing

By the time Eileen Heckart, the raucous and unrestrained sister-in-law, finally sits down to pour out the tearful words of her own tragedy we cry with her. The game attempt of a Jewish boy to substitute hilarity for his desperation in these surroundings is equally affecting. This is due to thoughtful, unpretentious and very gifted writing.

The train of events are trivial: the wife of a traveling salesman in a small Oklahoma oil town struggles to raise a young boy and a teenage girl on a limited income. Husband and wife quarrel violently and he departs, vowing never to return. In his absence an emotional crisis develops which convinces each of the need for affection to face "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs."

But the plot is entirely subordinate to the characterizations offered by Teresa Wright, as the wife; Pat Hingle, the husband; Eileen Heckart, as Miss Wright's elder sister; Timmy Everett, the Jewish cadet from a neighboring military school; Charles Saari, the rebellious sprout; Judith Robinson, his insecure sister; Evans Evans, her flapper friend, and Frank Overton, the brother-in-law.

## Kudos for Kazan

For all of this the greatest kudos must be given Elia Kazan, who directed. There are few plays in which the skill of the stage marshal is constantly evident, but this is one. The words are there, but Mr. Kazan has provided depth and meaning for each decible.

Timmy Everett might have been a conventionally unhappy little boy, because of his religion, but here he is given a desperately nodding, hopeful delivery that is searing. He succeeds equally in bringing Evans Evans, who might have been just another dizzy little doll, to the brink of stardom in her Broadway debut. Pat Hingle and Teresa Wright, both accomplished, here surpass themselves, and Miss Heckart revels in the most rewarding role of her career. She is merely magnificent.

Ben Edwards has conceived a fine, corny living room and stairs for the family abode, and Lucinda Ballard has run up a series of 1920 gowns which, however silly, look a little like the latest from Paris today.

This may not be Mr. Inge's best play, but in combination with Mr. Kazan, it emerges as such.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 6, 1957

## —FIRST NIGHT REPORT—

# WALTER KERR'S REVIEW

### *'The Dark at the Top of the Stairs'*

IT'S A curious fact that almost the first thing you notice about designer Ben Edwards' long, rambling old-fashioned Oklahoma living room is the alcoves: the dim recess where a swinging door opens and closes silently, the tiny back parlor where the player-piano lurks behind fringed drapes, the empty space that surrounds the front screen door and seems to lead off to nowhere. There is, too, a wildly steep staircase that shoots bolt upright to the dark at the top of it, but it's the small, private nooks and crannies that count most.

For "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" is the kind of play that a child might have overheard as he passed, hastily or idly, through the back corners of his parents' lives. When young Charles Saari, with a half-ton mop of yellow hair sprawling over his forehead and his lower lip set in a stubborn indifference, barges swiftly in or out of his elders' universe, all inflections change.

• • •

Eileen Heckart, as an aunt with bobbed hair and jade earrings that rattle as rapidly as her tongue, may at the moment be whispering a fast, scandalous confidence to the boy's broken-hearted mother. But the appearance of the child is a warning for sky-rockets to go up, for Miss Heckart's scratched-slate voice to strip gears violently and bellow open into whooping affection. A child hears one tone at the threshold, another as he is sighted, still another as he is vanishing through the portieres.

It is this erratic, tantalizing, half-understood and violently unexpected universe of mysteriously behaved adults that author William Inge, director Elia Kazan, and all of the actors have caught so perfectly, and so touchingly, at the Music Box.

Not that the children's roles are dominant; they are simply ears that listen, legs that shuffle perplexedly, eyes that stare in incomprehension and occasional hysterical defiance as a mother and father fight over a party dress, as an aunt painfully refuses to take the family into her own household, as lonely voices in the kitchen cry out during an all-night rain.

• • •

What they see and hear and cannot altogether grasp is brilliantly acted. Miss Heckart, noisily picking the meat out of cracked walnuts and even more noisily pretending that all is well with her own love life, grips a wicker rocker with her fists, instructs the world in intolerance ("I don't know what you see in Norma Talmadge, and besides she's a Catholic"), and lavishes her secretly shattered heart on the youngsters around her in a run-on, non-stop, piercingly desperate performance that is simply stunning. Beneath the busy, showy, wantonly generous activity there is a secret, and a hidden simplicity. When she gets to it, when her fingers hide her mouth and she speaks as softly and as honestly as she can, the dazzling pattern irises down to a sharp, chilling, blindingly clear focus. Miss Heckart can bring tears by the harsh expedient of cutting off her own.

• • •

If the evening possesses another small tour de force of comparable power it is that wrought by Timmy Everett as a Jewish cadet uncomfortably but gamely introduced into a family that has no notion how to deal with him. As Mr. Everett stammers politely, smiles winningly, and goes on talking genially as long as he can, he makes it wonderfully plain that this willing hanger-on is a lost soul who expects nothing and is grateful for anything at all. The scene, a long moment of helpless but completely winning self-exposure, is unforgettable.

But every one has his glimmer of light, or half-light, to contribute. Teresa Wright's sturdy, faintly demanding, very worried mother, Pat Hingle's bawling and brusquely considerate father, Evans Evans' version of an Orphan Annie who has grown up enough to Charleston, Frank Overton's quietly desperate uncle, and Judith Robinson's frightened teen-ager are all tensely, sensitively realized.

• • •

The play is a thread, and it cannot absorb some of the knots that work themselves into it. A cadet's suicide is too much of a burden for the fragile and sentimental memories that constitute the core of the evening; Mr. Kazan occasionally insists on more terror than the dark stairwell really creates; the language is sometimes uncomfortably bald (the mother saying "I've kept you too close to me, boy," the boy plainly declaiming "How can you keep from hating?").

But for all the strain that is occasionally put upon it, the thread never really snaps. A graceful curve of life continues to flicker; a baffling world comes together and gives off a glow. The glimpses we—and the children—get are genuinely illuminating. "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" is wonderfully evocative: warm, troubled and deeply moving.

# "The Makropoulos Secret"

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

December 4, 1957

## 'Makropoulos Secret' Produced at Phoenix

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Karel Capek, a bouncing Czech, wrote science fiction for the theatre in the early 1920s. His best play, "R U R," was about the destruction of the human race by a horde of mechanical monsters. If it hadn't been that two of these monsters, a boy and a girl, fell in love, we wouldn't be here today and I wouldn't have gone to the Phoenix Theatre last evening.

Another of Capek's fantasies was "The Makropoulos Secret," and Tyrone Guthrie, the bouncing Briton, has re-adapted and directed it for the Phoenix. Even with the splendid presence of Eileen Herlie and the Eric von Stroheim performance of a newcomer to our theatre, Karel Stepanek, "The Makropoulos Secret" is just about as dull as it is confusing. It also gives some of the minor actors an opportunity to do some bad acting—and if you give a minor actor his head this is just what he will do every time.

Miss Herlie plays a kind of Eternal Woman. Possessed of a formula for youth and a gift for opera singing, she has been a glamor woman for 368 years. In the French Revolution she knew Danton fairly intimately, for example, and did not like his cold, damp hands.

So, last evening at the Phoenix, Miss Herlie decided the hell with it. She was tired of everlasting romance—and so was I—and she surrendered the ancient document which contained the Makropoulos secret. The thing was set fire to in a candle flame with some difficulty, and I went out into a light snowstorm to catch an uptown bus.

**"THE MAKROPOULOS SECRET"**

Play in two acts by Karel Capek, adapted by Tyrone Guthrie; staged by Mr. Guthrie; settings by Norris Houghton; costumes by Patton Campbell; lighting by Tharon Musser; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, December 3, 1957. The cast:

Vitek.....Conrad Bain
Berthold Gregor.....Whitfield Connor
Kristina.....Nancy Malone
Dr. Kolonaty.....William Hutt
Emilia Marty.....Eileen Herlie
Baron Prus.....Karel Stepanek
Janek Prus.....Richard Morse
Opera Manager.....Boris Aplon
Conductor.....Taylor Graves
Official.....Dalton Dearborn
Hauck-Sendorf Ollendorf.....Eric House

Daily Mirror
December 4, 1957

**ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE**

# Capek Play Is Enjoyable

If you like to see landmarks of the drama, the Phoenix Theatre is the place to do it. Following upon the heels of a fine revival of Schiller's "Mary Stuart" came an interesting production of Karel Capek's "The Makropoulos Secret" Tuesday evening.

We are probably one of the few members of the old guard left who caught this mystery melodrama, with philosophical implications, back in 1926, when Helen Menken essayed the role currently played by Eileen Herlie. Over the years, we've had fond memories of it.

**SO, WHEN** we heard that Tyrone Guthrie was to direct his own adaptation of the Capek thriller, we looked forward to enjoying it again. And we did, too, when the dynamic Dr. Guthrie was staging it straight and shunning a tendency toward horseplay. In the first stanza, he got laughs where we are reasonably sure the author didn't plant them.

We suspect Guthrie figured that a chuckle or two would help get the venerable piece away to a flying start. That's probably why he had Miss Herlie, for example, ask for and smoke a cigar. That drew a lusty laugh from some, and an embarrassed giggle from others.

"The Makropoulos Secret" has to do with an opera singer who supplies documents dating back more than a hundred years in a lawsuit being tried in a mid-European city. Inevitably, those concerned attempt to find out how she knows so much about the past.

Eventually, through relentless probing worthy of any chiller-diller, they learn her secret. But we aren't going to reveal it, for it would lessen the play's excitement and suspense should you spend at evening at the Phoenix. Anyway, as "Ol' Man River" has it, some are tired of living and scared of dying.

**DR. GUTHRIE** is a man who believes in letting actors act. That's a formula that works brilliantly with a "Tamburlaine," "Mary Stuart," or "Matchmaker." But with a "Makropoulos Secret," it results in over-acting. We would suggest that in this instance the broad stroke, the hoke, be tossed right out the window.

For most of the evening, Miss Herlie wisely and resolutely refuses to be tempted. Her performance is tensely dramatic, and highly effective. She catches all the facets of a woman of mystery, a true femme fatale. She proves herself an actress of power, resource and quality.

**Karel Stepanek, an actor of repute from Capek's own Czechoslovakia, makes an auspicious Manhattan bow as the sinster, cruel and arrogant Baron Prus who holds a brief for the aristocratic superman. Whitfield Connor, Nancy Malone, Conrad Bain, William Hutt, Richard Morse and Eric House do all that Guthrie requires of them in other roles.**

Dr. Guthrie's version of "The Makropoulos Secret" isn't exactly up to the one we remember from 1926, but it has its merits. Particularly when the bids for laughs are put aside in favor of a fascinating study of the possessor of a great secret that most would like to know—and yet shudder at the knowing.

Journal American
December 4, 1957

# Acting and Drama Team Up Joyfully

By JOHN McCLAIN

"THE MAKROPOULOS SECRET," offered at the Phoenix Theatre last night, is no secret at all ere the pews are warm. It is apparent to the most laggard client that he is dealing with a leading lady at least a century old, probably older. And this is the playwright's intention.

His problem is to make his brash presumption credible to the audience, if not the baffled actors: to keep the ball in the air until the final act, when the workings of the ever-last joy juice can be revealed.

This is not a simple task, but for me it succeeds. This is due in large measure to Eileen Herlie, the star, and Tyrone Guthrie, who directed and is also credited with a new adaptation of the Karel Capek play. In less skillful hands, it could teeter on the brink of farce.

## Bowl of Caviar

Here we have Miss Herlie cast as a renowned opera star, arriving in a Central European city just as a law suit between two families is about to be settled. The litigation goes back 100 years and more, and Miss Herlie blandly tells the lawyer where certain sealed papers can be located, and just what's in them. Now, we know.

To keep these and similar machinations alive, with Miss Herlie growing older with each revelation, the Capek-Guthrie folio is an achievement of sorts. It is at times windy and confusing, but it is always a resplendent joust for the star. She, alone, can defy a titter with the announcement that she is actually 326 years old.

In the interim, her role is a player's bowl of caviar. Exquisitely gowned, she is seldom off-stage; her lines are brittle, gay; her regal presence dominates the evening. In the last chukker she is allowed to go all-out in emotional release, an assignment in which she excels.

Around her stand a platoon of superlative operatives, both veteran and cadet. Karel Stepanek, no novice abroad but here making his bow to New York, is a brilliantly stiff-backed and sinister Baron Prus. As the ardent suitor, Whitfield Connor exhibits suitable charm, attraction, and belief. William Hutt gives a compelling impersonation of the bewildered lawyer, and Eric House is uproarious as the great lady's doddering ex-lover. Conrad Bain, the clerk with a cause, has a shining scene in the final moments.

Again, Dr. Guthrie's sure and inventive staging is everywhere in evidence. Norris Houghton's sets are pleasantly unpretentious; Patton Campbell's costumes, tasteful and luminous.

The Phoenix is having a happy season: "Mary Stuart"—now, this. "The Makropoulos Secret" is a joyful union of immaculate acting and imaginative drama; I believe it could thrive uptown.

## New York Post

December 4, 1957

# TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

## The Lady Who Lived for Centuries

The malediction against reviewers who give away the plot of a suspense drama clearly doesn't apply in the case of "The Makropoulos Secret." It must be known by virtually everybody that the famous play by the Czech author, Karel Capek, which was presented last night at the Phoenix Theater in Tyrone Guthrie's new English adaptation, deals with a woman who was enabled to live virtually forever by the discoveries of her scientist father. A detail that may have escaped you, though, is that she had reached the age of 326 when the drama begins.

One reason why it is no outrage to reveal all this about the Capek work is that it is only in part a suspense drama. It is also a play of philosophical speculation, and, in Mr. Guthrie's versatile adaptation and staging, something of an ironic comedy. And here I think we come to what is chiefly wrong with "The Makropoulos Secret," despite the grim fascination of its central idea. It sets out to cover too much territory. Just when the suspense is getting to be effectively macabre, the humor emerges, and, when the end seems in sight, philosophy begins.

**The Debate**

This aspect is obviously the section of his play closest to the heart of the late dramatist, and it seems to me rather a shame that all of it has been set down in a corner of the last act. Some of it might have been helpful earlier. It has been maintained by many people that Capek wrote his speculations on the evils of longevity as a reply to Bernard Shaw, who held just the opposite view in his "Back to Methuselah." Whether this legend has any truth to it, I am unable to tell you, but I suspect Shaw, for all his gab, was the abler debater.

Anyway, while Shaw argued that only by advancing his span of life to several centuries could man develop the wisdom to solve his problems, Capek held that advanced longevity meant merely increased boredom and feebleness of will and interest. The poor lady who has lived those 326 years is still handsome and sought after by men, but existence has lost its savor for her, even though she does rush about looking for the missing family formula. And when she offers the secret to a group of men and one girl, they are pretty disturbed by the perilous gift.

Whether or not it was here meant as a rebuttal to Shaw, the idea of the dangers of longevity is hardly the most original of dramatic conceptions, but it does have a definite provocative interest as Capek argues it. And the suspense scenes, with the mysterious opera singer revealing inside knowledge of the beginnings of a law suit, an occurence of a century ago, have their eerie dramatic effectiveness. But the play, instead of growing in power, seems to waste itself by wandering off in various directions when it should be concentrating its resources.

Mr. Guthrie, who is one of the most expert of showmen, has staged his adaptation with his customary dexterity and artfulness, but I'm not so sure about the adaptation, itself. Eileen Herlie brings just the proper note of strangeness and distance to the role of the ancient heroine. It is a highly effective performance. And there is helpful playing by Karel Stepanek, Conrad Bain, William Hutt, Nancy Malone, Eric House and Whitfield Connor. "The Makropoulos Secret" has an inescapably haunting appeal, but it is disappointingly mild.

## New York Herald Tribune

December 4, 1957

# 'The Makropoulos Secret' Opens at Phoenix Theater

By Walter Kerr

I WON'T tell you "The Makropoulos Secret" but I'll tell you the secret of Eileen Herlie. She isn't really Eileen Herlie at all. She is Madame Modjeska, she has been supernaturally returned to us in her absolute prime, and she is using this assumed name simply to confuse everybody.

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These facts are, I'm sure, as difficult to believe as most of the fascinating shenanigans that are going on at the Phoenix, but there's something in them. We won't even count the fact that Miss Herlie, in her elaborately-curled hair and her cascade of furs, looks exactly like every Modjeska photograph Mr. Daniel Blum ever collected for an album. It's the acting that matters, acting that seems to have been spirited right out of the heart of the warm-blooded nineteenth century, given all the flesh and steel and sultry eyeshadow it undoubtedly had when its pulse was beating proudly, and deposited here to astonish, amuse, and thoroughly delight us.

Watch, if you will, this Herlie-Modjeska smoke a cigar. The trick is to get in your mouth, roll it to one side so that it is firmly gripped in the teeth, and then—head held high—ripple out a waterfall of immaculately articulated gloriously ladylike, syllables. You can try it, but who else can do it?

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There are a great many other things that this genie out of a champagne bottle can do, and does do, in the Karel Capek curio that Tyrone Guthrie has revived for our puzzlement and general delectation. Among other things, she communicates through the back of her head. Take an astonishing little scene in which a doddering relic of the older European gentry totters gallantly backstage to an opera star's dressing room. He has brought flowers, wistfully, as he did to the divas of his youth. He is ready to toast this particular diva—who rather reminds him of one he loved long ago—and he has raised his glass. Miss Herlie rests on a chaise-longue, turned thoroughly away from us. The old sport's eyes meet hers. In the intake of a breath, and a few seconds' silence, something happens between them—something strong enough to blow the frail gallant backward, like a windblown dandelion, into the lap of the nearest onlooker. Eric House makes his own superb contribution to the moment. But the look we didn't see—we simply felt it—was Miss Herlie's.

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Director Guthrie is obviously enjoying himself enormously in setting out to find a very delicate, perhaps nonexistent, tightrope on which the seriocomic fantasies that once intrigued a Czechoslovakian playwright can be judiciously balanced. How close does he come? Well, the evening has its patently preposterous stretches, a few overly-complicated and mildly confusing ones, and some very drunken shifts of tone as it leaps from suicide to something very like low comedy.

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But it's the faint air of comedy, the tongue-in-cheek insouciance with which the director faces absurdity, that squares everything away and keeps us attentively bemused. Things may go a little far when William Hutt's entertaining lawyer lands flat on his stomach across a clutterd desk, or when Whitfield Conner's startled lover tumbles backward over an office chair. But the uncertain shuffle of feet as two romantic gentlemen try to outwait, and outpace, one another in a lady's dressing room sets exactly the right half-edgy, half - nonsensical atmosphere for what is to follow. And when Mr. Guthrie wants to switch us from the fragile comedy of an old man's determination to elope over the eerie sound of the same fellow sobbing like a child while the mood turns grim, his touch is wonderfully sure. He is further abetted in his wire-walking act by the appealing ingenue of Nancy Malone and the monocled, tight-lipped aristocrat of Karel Stepanek.

I'm still not going to tell you "The Makropoulos Secret." But if you don't believe Miss Herlie has supernatural powers, consider the fact that one of the characters keeps insisting that her voice is "like snow—glittering, marvelously pure—like snow" and that when we came out of the theater last evening, it was snowing.